NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5787 MAY 3, 1978
WAYNE COREY/BANGKOK

THE VOYAGE OF THE HAI CHU

ANNCR:

IN MID APRIL, ABOUT TWO HUNDRED FIFTY VIETNAMESE REGUGEES ON A BOAT FLEEING FROM VIETNAM WERE INVOLVED IN A HIGHLY PUBLICIZED INCIDENT. THESE VIETNAMESE ARE NOW IN A REFUGEE CAMP IN MALAYSIA WHERE VOA CORRESPONDENT WAYNE COREY TALKED WITH SOME OF THEM TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR EPIC VOYAGE.

VOICE:

ON APRIL NINTH, A VESSEL CALLED THE HAI CHU LEFT SAIGON AFTER ITS OWNER AND CREW OBTAINED PAPERS FROM COMMUNIST OFFICIALS ALLOWING THE SHIP TO GO TO CA MAU ON THE SOUTHERN TIP OF VIETNAM. THE SIXTY FIVE PEOPLE ABOARD THEN HAD NO INTENTION OF TRANSPORTING FISH AS THEIR PAPERS STATED. THEY WERE EMBARKING INSTEAD ON A HAZARDOUS AND UNCERTAIN VOYAGE TO FREEDOM.

ONE OF THE PASSENGERS, A FORMER SOUTH VIETNAMESE LAWYER, RECALLED THAT THE HAI CHU'S EXIT FROM VIETNAM WAS DELAYED TWICE -- ONCE LAST YEAR BECAUSE OF FEAR OF DISCOVERY AND AGAIN EARLY THIS YEAR BECAUSE THE CAPTAIN AT THE LAST MINUTE DEMANDED MORE GOLD THAN HE HAD BEEN PROMISED. BUT ON APRIL TENTH THE HAI CHU MADE A CAREFULLY PLANNED RENDEZVOUS WITH ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY PEOPLE WHO HAD MADE THEIR WAY TO A SECRET PICK UP LOCATION ALONG A RIVER SOUTH OF SAIGON.

THE ORIGINAL DESTINATION WAS SINGAPORE WHERE THE REFUGEES PLANNED TO RECEIVE FOOD, FUEL AND WATER FOR THE ONWARD TRIP TO AUSTRALIA. BUT THE HAI CHU NEVER MADE IT THAT FAR. ACCORDING TO THE REFUGEES, THE SHIP BEGAN TO LEAK SOON AFTER PICKING UP THE REST OF THE PASSENGERS, AND THE ENGINE FAILED SEVERAL TIMES

AS THE SHIP HEADED SOUTH. BY THE TIME THE HAI CHU REACHED AN OIL RIG AND PLATFORM OPERATED BY ESSO OF MALAYSIA, THE SHIP'S WATER PUMP WAS FAULTY AND THE ENGINE'S GEAR BOX WAS BROKEN AND THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH FOOD.

THE OILMEN ON THE RIG GAVE THE REFUGEES A SOPHISTICATED COMPASS AND SOME FOOD. THEY ALSO OFFERED FUEL AND WATER. BUT THE REFUGEES SAID THEY DECIDED THEY COULD NOT CONTINUE THEIR VOYAGE SO THEY ASKED TO BE ALLOWED TO SEEK SAFETY ON THE OIL PLATFORM.

THE STORY HAS A HAPPY ENDING. THE REFUGEES WERE ALLOWED ONTO THE OIL RIG AND NO ONE DROWNED. THE MALAYSIAN NAVY COULD NOT REPAIR THE BOAT, SO THE REFUGEES WERE ABLE TO ENTER A UNITED NATIONS CAMP ON THE MALAYSIAN ISLAND OF PULAU BESAR.

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JS/RTD